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## CDC: Strong evidence in-person schooling can be done safely

In this Feb. 2, 2021, file photo, students wear masks as they work in a fourth-grade classroom, at Elk Ridge Elementary School in Buckley, Wash.

Associated Press

### Associated Press

The nation's top public health agency said Friday that in-person schooling can resume safely with

masks, social distancing and other strategies, and vaccination of teachers, while important, is not a prerequisite for reopening.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released its long-awaited road map for getting students back to classrooms in the

middle of a pandemic that has killed more than 479,000 people in the U.S.

**Continued on Page 2**

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## CDC: Strong evidence in-person schooling can be done safely

Continued from Front

But the agency's guidance is just that — it cannot force schools to reopen, and CDC officials were careful to say they are not calling for a mandate that all U.S. schools be reopened.

Officials said there is strong evidence now that schools can reopen, especially at lower grade levels.

The new guidance includes many of the same measures previously backed by the CDC, but it suggests them more forcefully. It emphasizes that all of the recommendations must be implemented strictly and consistently to keep school safe. It also provides more detailed suggestions about what type of schooling should be offered given different levels of virus transmission, with differing advice for elementary, middle and high schools.

Recommended measures include hand washing, disinfection of school facilities, diagnostic testing and contact tracing to find new infections and separate infected people from others in a school. It's also



In this Dec. 7, 2020, file photo, students enter P.S. 134 Henrietta Szold Elementary School in New York.

Associated Press

more emphatic than past guidance on the need to wear masks in school.

"We know that most clusters in the school setting have occurred when there are breaches in mask wearing," Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the CDC's director, said in a call with reporters. Vaccinating teachers can

provide "an additional layer of protection," she said. The guidance was issued as President Joe Biden faces increasing pressure to deliver on his promise to get the majority of schools back to in-person teaching by the end of his first 100 days in office. The White House said this week that a national strategy would be guided by science.

"We've used stronger languages than prior guidance. We've been much more prescriptive here as to putting some guardrails on what can and should be done to get to a safe reopening," Walensky said. "And I can assure you that this is free from political meddling," she added. There's wide agreement that learning in the classroom is more effective and that students can face isolation and learning setbacks at home. But teachers unions in some areas say schools have failed to make buildings safe enough to return.

The new guidance was embraced by both sides of the debate, with each saying it bolstered their position. House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said it's further evidence that schools are equipped to reopen now.

The new information "affirms what many of us,

including students and parents, have known for months: It is critical for schools to open as safely and as soon as possible," he said.

Becky Pringle, president of the National Education Association, applauded the guidance but said schools are failing to meet it. Most still have outdated ventilation systems, she said, and few have the type of virus testing programs suggested by the CDC.

"CDC standards still aren't being met in too many of our schools," Pringle said. "We can and must provide students the opportunity to return to in-person learning, but we also must ensure that every school has the safety measures in place to keep students and educators safe."

CDC officials emphasized that in-person learning has not been identified as a substantial driver of coronavirus spread in U.S. communities, and that transmission among students is now considered relatively rare. The CDC also stressed that the safest way to open schools is by making sure there is as little disease in a community as possible. The agency urged local officials to assess whether a bad outbreak is occurring in a community when making decisions about sending

adults and children in to schools. The guidance included a color-coded chart, from blue to red, on assessing community spread, including rates of new cases per 100,000 people and the percentage of positive tests. That said, high community transmission does not necessarily mean schools cannot be open — especially those at the elementary level. If school mitigation measures are strictly followed, the risk of spread in the schools should still be low, the guidance suggests.

The document suggests that when things get risky, elementary schools can go hybrid, providing in-person instruction at least on some days, but that middle and high schools might go virtual.

"The older children get ... the more they act like adults in terms of transmission and disease," Walensky explained. "So when we are in areas of high transmission, we have pushed more for elementary school hybrid learning. Government officials estimate that about 60% of K-12 schools right now have some form of in-person learning going on, though in many cases it may be part-time."

Schools also can tighten up restrictions for the in-person learning that is going on. For example, the CDC continues to recommend that children be spaced 6 feet apart in school settings. But it should be required when there's a worrisome surge of new infections in the community, said Greta Massetti, a CDC official who led much of the work on the new guidance.

Unlike former President Donald Trump, who pressured schools to open and blasted the CDC for issuing guidance that he said was impractical, Biden has kept his distance from the CDC as it works on recommendations. Even after the CDC's director recently said that vaccinations are not a prerequisite for reopening, the White House declined to take a firm stance on the question. □



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## Biden will try to close Guantanamo after 'robust' review

By BEN FOX

Associated Press

**WASHINGTON (AP)** — President Joe Biden will seek to close the prison on the U.S. base at Guantanamo Bay following a review process, resuming a project begun under the Obama administration, the White House said Friday.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said it was the "intention" of the Biden administration to close the detention facility, something President Barack Obama pledged to do within a year shortly after he took office in January 2009.

Psaki gave no timeline, telling reporters that the formal review would be "robust" and would require the participation of officials from the Department of Defense, the Justice Department and other agencies who have not yet been appointed under the new administration.

"There are many players from different agencies who need to be part of this policy discussion about the steps forward," she said.

Obama ran into intense domestic political opposition when he sought to close the detention center, a notorious symbol of the U.S. fight against terrorism. Biden may have more leeway now that there are only



In this photo reviewed by U.S. military officials, the Office of Military Commissions building used for Periodic Review Board hearings is seen, Thursday, April 18, 2019, in Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, Cuba.

40 prisoners left and Guantanamo draws much less public attention, though his announcement did draw some immediate criticism. The U.S. opened the detention center in January 2002 to hold people suspected of ties to al-Qaida and the Taliban. It became a source of international criticism over the mistreatment of prisoners and the prolonged imprisonment of people without charge. The announcement of a closure plan was not unex-

pected. Biden had said as a candidate he supported closing the detention center. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said so as well in written testimony for his Senate confirmation. "Guantanamo has provided us the capability to conduct law of war detention in order to keep our enemies off the battlefield, but I believe it is time for the detention facility at Guantanamo to close," Austin said. The 40 remaining prisoners

at Guantanamo include five who were previously cleared for release through an intensive review process created under Obama as part of the effort to close the detention center and transfer the remaining prisoners to facilities in the U.S. At its peak in 2003, the detention center at the Navy base on the southeast tip of Cuba held nearly 680 prisoners. Amid the international outrage, President George W. Bush called it a "a propaganda tool for our

enemies and a distraction for our allies" and said he supported closing it but left it to his successor.

Under Bush, the U.S. began efforts to prosecute some prisoners for war crimes in tribunals known as military commissions. It also released 532 prisoners.

Obama vowed to close the detention center, while keeping the larger Navy base, but ran into fierce political opposition over plans to prosecute and imprison men in the U.S. and concerns that returning others to their homeland would pose a security risk.

To some extent at least, that opposition remains.

"The Democrats' obsession with bringing terrorists into Americans' backyards is bizarre, misguided, and dangerous," Sen. John Cornyn, a Republican from Texas, said after the White House announcement Friday. "Just like with President Obama, Republicans will fight it tooth and nail."

Under his administration, 197 were repatriated or resettled in other countries.

That left 41 under Trump, who pledged at one point to "load it up" with some "bad dudes." He never did and approved a single release, a Saudi prisoner who had reached a plea deal in his war crimes case. □

## White House aide suspended for threatening reporter

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE

Associated Press

**WASHINGTON (AP)** — White House deputy press secretary T.J. Ducklo has been suspended for a week without pay after he reportedly issued a sexist and profane threat to a journalist seeking to cover his relationship with another reporter.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Friday that Ducklo's conduct was "completely unacceptable." Psaki said while she had not spoken about the incident with President Joe Biden, Ducklo and aides "at the highest levels" of the White House's communications team had apologized for the incident.

"No one wants anyone to

feel uncomfortable, to be put in an uncomfortable position," Psaki said.

Psaki said in a statement earlier Friday that Ducklo had been suspended without pay with the approval of White House chief of staff Ron Klain. She said Ducklo "is the first to acknowledge this is not the standard of behavior set out" by Biden, and that Ducklo had sent the reporter in question "a personal note professing his profound regret."

Ducklo's personal life came under scrutiny earlier this week when Politico reported on his relationship with a reporter for the news outlet Axios who was assigned to cover the Biden campaign and its transition. Before

Politico broke the story Tuesday, People Magazine published a glowing profile of the relationship. It was the first time either one had publicly acknowledged the relationship.

Psaki, White House communications director Kate Bedingfield and Anita Dunn, director of West Wing operations, were all reportedly involved in conversations with Politico editors about the incident. Psaki said that when Ducklo returns, he won't be assigned to work with any Politico reporters.

President Donald Trump's White House was known for an adversarial relationship with reporters, and both Trump himself and his lead spokespeople would



In this Feb. 9, 2021 photo, White House deputy press secretary TJ Ducklo listens as press secretary Jen Psaki speaks during a press briefing at the White House in Washington.

Associated Press

frequently pick fights with and lob personal attacks at reporters from behind the podium. But the Biden White House sought to strike a more cordial and professional tone with the Washington press corps from the start, installing a cadre of seasoned Washington communicators led by Psaki. □

# Census: No redistricting data until end of September

By MIKE SCHNEIDER

**Associated Press**

The U.S. Census Bureau said Friday it won't be delivering data used for redrawing congressional and state legislative districts until the end of September, causing headaches for state lawmakers and redistricting commissions facing deadlines to redraw districts this year. Officials at the statistical agency blamed operational delays during the 2020 census caused by the pandemic.

"The biggest reason? COVID-19. It's something beyond the Census Bureau's control," said Kathleen Styles, the Census Bureau's chief of Decennial Communications and Stakeholder Relations, in a call with reporters.

Styles had previously said the redistricting data would be available no earlier than the end of July because of delays caused by the virus. Before the pandemic, the deadline for finishing the redistricting data had been March 31.

The redistricting data includes counts of population by race, Hispanic origin, voting age and housing occupancy status at geographic levels as small as neighborhoods, and they are used for drawing voting districts for Congress and state legislatures. Unlike in past decades when the data were released to



In this Oct. 5, 2020 file photo, a flashing sign near the iconic "Freedom Tower," advises people to fill out their census forms in downtown Miami.

**Associated Press**

states on a flow basis, the 2020 redistricting data will be made available to the states all at once, according to the Census Bureau. The delayed release creates a chain reaction in the political world. Several states will not get the data until after their legal deadlines for drawing new districts, requiring them to either rewrite laws or ask courts to allow them a free pass due to the delay. Candidates may not know yet whether they will live in the district they want to run in by the filing deadline. In some cases, if fights over new maps drag into the

New Year, primaries may have to be delayed. In the end, though, experts said the elections will proceed as normal in November 2022. The biggest impact will be to compress the window during which lawyers can challenge bad maps in court. Census Bureau officials are aware of the deadlines facing lawmakers and redistricting commissions nationwide, but "we have a strong schedule that reflects the time we need," said James Whitehorne, chief of the Redistricting and Voting Rights Data office at the bureau.

"We are consistently aware of the urgency and needs of the states for this data," Whitehorne said. Eric Holder, a U.S. attorney general in the Obama administration, warned that the new deadline shouldn't be "a pretext to hold 2022 elections on old maps" in an effort at political gain, or to draw maps without significant public input, using the compressed timetable as an excuse. "I will oppose any such efforts," said Holder, who chairs the National Democratic Redistricting Committee. In Pennsylvania, the state Senate's rank-

ing member, President Pro Tempore Jake Corman, said late-arriving data could mean postponement of next year's primary election, currently set for May 17, 2022. The state House and Senate will hold a joint committee hearing Wednesday on the impact of the delay in the Census Bureau data.

The announcement from the statistical agency came as a bipartisan group of U.S. senators introduced legislation that would extend the deadline for turning in the redistricting data to Sept. 30.

The legislation introduced by Democratic U.S. Sen. Brian Schatz of Hawaii and Republican U.S. Sens. Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan, both of Alaska, also sets an April 30 deadline for turning in the apportionment figures used for divvying up congressional seats among the states. The Census Bureau had previously announced it was aiming to hand in those state population counts by that date.

The once-a-decade census is used to determine how many congressional seats and Electoral College votes each state gets. It also is used for redrawing state and local political districts and determining the distribution of \$1.5 trillion in federal spending each year.□

## Man charged with shooting guard at Virginia federal facility



In this 2017 photo released by the Chesapeake Sheriff's Office is William D. Rankin.

**Associated Press**

**NORFOLK, Va. (AP)** — A man accused of shooting a security guard at a Virginia social security building came equipped with several weapons, 600 rounds of ammunition and three bottles of beer, authorities said. William Rankin, 44, was charged with attempted murder of someone helping an employee of the U.S. government, and other offenses, after he entered the Norfolk Social Security Administration building Monday afternoon and wounded a guard, FBI Special Agent Justin Goodrich said Thursday.

Rankin was also wounded in an exchange of gunfire. Norfolk police previously said Rankin's wounds were life-threatening but it's unclear whether his condition has changed. The guard was expected to recover. Rankin's wife told FBI agents after the shooting that he had been dealing with Social Security over the phone for months regarding his mother's benefits, according to the affidavit filed against Rankin. The incident began when Rankin entered the building with a rifle bag on his shoulder and shouted, "I

want my money!" court documents stated. The guard told Rankin he could not enter the building due to COVID-19 protocols, but Rankin became agitated, pulled out a pistol and told the guard he wasn't leaving without the money, the document said. Rankin asked the guard to put his gun down and when the guard refused, Rankin fired at the officer, wounding him in several places including the upper chest, Goodrich said. A bulletproof vest saved the guard. Rankin turned to leave

but the officer fired back, wounding Rankin, court documents said. The guard went upstairs to contact police and later came downstairs to watch Rankin until authorities arrived. Authorities found several guns and roughly 600 rounds of ammunition in Rankin's rifle bag, along with beer and sandwiches. Officers later interviewed Rankin's wife, who told them he was having issues getting Social Security benefits for his mother. It's unclear whether Rankin had an attorney who would comment on his behalf.□

## Russia says it's ready for split if E.U. imposes new sanctions

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV

Associated Press

**MOSCOW (AP)** — Russia is prepared for a split with the European Union if the EU imposes new crippling sanctions amid a dispute over the treatment of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, the nation's top diplomat warned Friday.

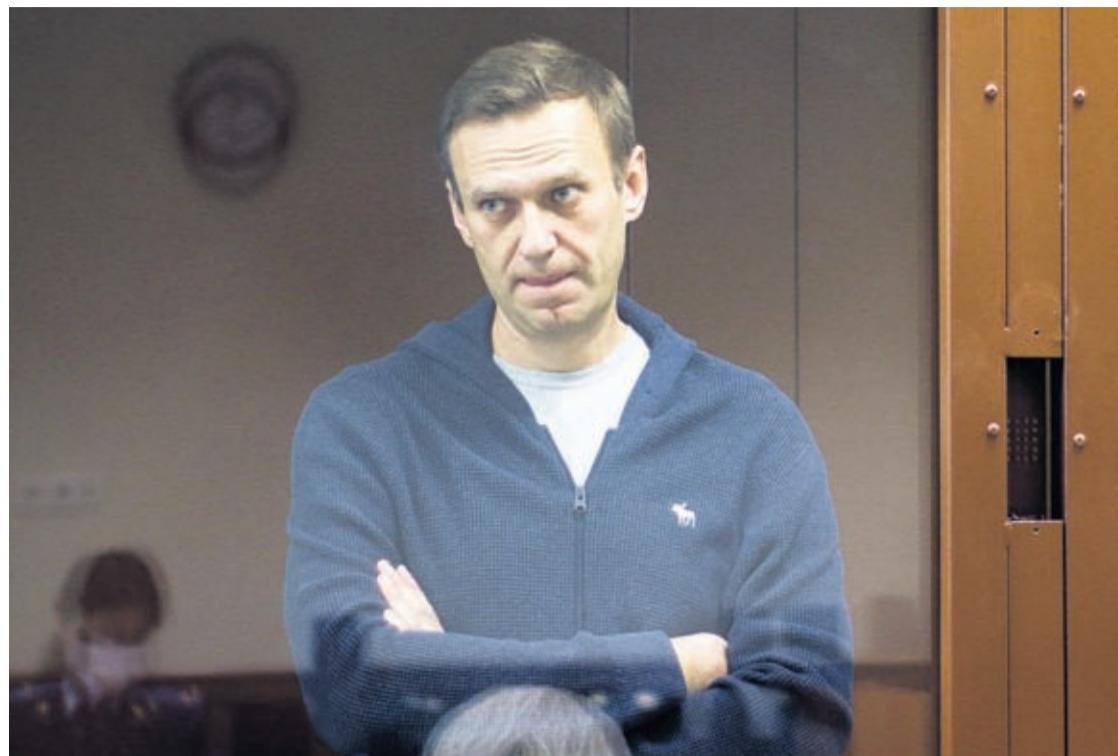
In response to a question about Moscow's willingness to rupture links with the EU, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in televised remarks that Russia doesn't want to be isolated but must increase its self-sufficiency to face potential EU sanctions.

"We don't want to be isolated from international life, but we must be ready for that," Lavrov said. "If you want peace, you must prepare for war."

Asked if Russia is heading toward a split with the European Union, Lavrov replied, "We proceed from the assumption that we are ready for that."

He emphasized the importance of economic ties with the 27 EU nations, adding that Russia would continue engaging in mutually beneficial cooperation.

At the same time, Lavrov said, Russia must prepare



In this photo taken on Friday, Feb. 12, 2021 and provided by the Babuskinsky District Court, Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny stands in a cage during a hearing on charges of defamation in the Babuskinsky District Court in Moscow, Russia.

Associated Press

for the worst and increasingly rely on its own resources.

"We must achieve that in the economic sphere, if we see again, as we have felt more than once, that sanctions imposed in some areas create risks to our economy, including in the most sensitive spheres, such as supplies of parts and components," the Russian foreign minister added.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov emphasized that Russia wants to maintain normal ties with the EU but needs to prepare for the worst, if the bloc takes hostile actions.

"If we face a destructive course that will hurt our infrastructure, our interests, Russia must be ready in advance for such unfriendly steps," Peskov said during a call with reporters when

asked about Lavrov's comment. "We must be self-reliant. We must ensure our security in the most sensitive strategic areas and be prepared to replace everything we could be deprived of with national infrastructure in case madness prevails and such unfriendly actions take place."

European Commission spokesman Peter Stano said Friday the EU wel-

comes "mutually beneficial cooperation whenever the other side is ready for such a cooperation and for such a dialogue," adding that Russia has "indicated that they are not really willing to go in this direction."

German Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Andrea Sasse described Lavrov's comments as "really disconcerting and completely incomprehensible to us." She told reporters in Berlin that Foreign Minister Heiko Maas had made Germany's grievances with Russia clear but also emphasized that "we are interested in cooperation with Russia."

Russia-EU relations have sunk to new lows over Navalny's arrest and imprisonment. The most prominent political foe of Russian President Vladimir Putin was arrested Jan. 17 upon his return from Germany, where he spent five months recuperating from the nerve agent poisoning he blamed on the Kremlin. Russian authorities have denied the allegations.

Last week, a court in Moscow sent Navalny to prison for two years and eight months for violating terms of his probation while recuperating in Germany. □

## Air travelers to Canada to isolate at hotels starting Feb 22

By ROB GILLIES

Associated Press

**TORONTO (AP)** — Air travelers to Canada will quarantine in a hotel starting on Feb. 22 as they await the result of a coronavirus test, Prime Minister Justin

Trudeau said Friday.

Trudeau previously announced stricter restrictions would be imposed on nonessential air travelers in response to new, likely more contagious variants. Government officials con-

firmed that — with limited exceptions — nonessential air travelers will be required to reserve a three-night stay in a government-authorized hotel at their own expense before they depart for Canada.

Those who cross the U.S. border by land won't have to isolate at a hotel, but will have to show a negative test taken within three days before arrival and be tested on arrival as well as toward the end of a 14-day quarantine at home or elsewhere.

Public Safety Minister Bill Blair said less than 5% of those who cross the land border are nonessential, one reason why the hotel stay is not required for those who enter by land. The measures especially

affect Canadian "snowbirds" who winter abroad and return home in the spring.

Health Minister Patty Hajdu said vaccinated Canadians will not be exempt because research is still not clear on whether those vaccinated can still transmit the virus to others. Some Canadian "snowbirds" are getting vaccinated in Florida and Arizona.

Trudeau said it could take up to three days for test results to be available and he previously said the cost of a hotel stay for air travelers could be \$2,000 Canadian (US\$1,576.). The steep cost for the hotel stay includes the cost for security, food and measures hotels will have to take to keep

their workers safe.

Travelers would then isolate at home or elsewhere if the test is negative. Canada already requires those entering the country to self-isolate for 14 days and bans nonessential travel to the country.

Trudeau also said he spoke to the chief executive of vaccine-maker Pfizer and said he confirmed Canada will get 4 million doses from that company before the end of March, as well as 10.8 million doses in April, May and June — more than previously announced.

Trudeau also said Canada is buying another 4 million Moderna vaccines and is looking at the possibility of getting vaccines from India. □



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau holds a news conference at Rideau Cottage in Ottawa on Friday, Feb. 5, 2021.

Associated Press

## Myanmar draft cybersecurity law adds to protests over coup

By ELAINE KURTENBACH

AP Business Writer

**BANGKOK (AP)** — A draft cybersecurity law due to be implemented in Myanmar has raised protests that it will be used to quash dissent rather than protect privacy.

Human rights advocates issued statements Friday urging the country's military leaders to drop the plan and end internet disruptions that have intensified since a Feb. 1 coup.

The draft law shows the military's intent to "permanently undermine internet freedom in the country," said Matthew Bugher, head of the Asia program for the group Article 19, which issued a statement condemning the plan along with the Open Net Association and the International Commission of Jurists.

Internet service providers and others were given until Monday, Feb. 15, to respond to the proposed law. "It is telling that controlling cyberspace is one of the top priorities of the Myanmar military, which seized power through an illegitimate coup d'état only last week," said Sam Zarifi, the International Commission of Jurists' secretary general. "The military is used to having total power in Myanmar, but this time they have to face a population that has access to information and can communicate internally and externally," he



Buddhist monks display pictures of deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi during a street march against the military coup in Mandalay, Myanmar on Friday, Feb. 12, 2021.

said. The military's seizure of power and arrest of national leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other members of her National League for Democracy party have sparked massive peaceful protests across the country, despite efforts by authorities to enforce order by disrupting internet services. That has put internet service providers and other telecommunications companies in a bind.

Jeff Paine, managing director of the Asia Internet Coalition, a group of leading global internet companies including Facebook and Google, said the bill would give the military

"unprecedented power to censor citizens and violate their privacy, contravening democratic norms and fundamental rights guaranteed under international law." He urged coup leaders to consider "potentially devastating" impacts on the Myanmar economy and people.

Norway's Telenor, a major mobile service provider, said it was facing "several dilemmas."

"Access to telecom services is essential for people to exercise their basic right to freedom of opinion and expression, and to gain information. These services are also critical in the ongoing

COVID-19 pandemic, and for economic opportunities," the company said in a statement posted on a section of its website devoted to the Myanmar crisis.

"When following authority orders in these irregular times, we know it has negative impact on human rights in Myanmar. We are working to minimize this impact," it said.

The company said it was assessing each government order according to its legality, impact on human rights, necessity and transparency. It listed five active directives from the government since Feb. 1 to block IP addresses and said it was

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urging authorities to maintain an open internet. But it also noted it needed to consider the safety of its own employees.

A group of 158 Myanmar nongovernmental organizations also has released a statement protesting the draft law.

Before the coup, the government had been working on a master plan for internet management and cybersecurity.

Among other requirements, opponents of the draft law said it calls for banning online anonymity, removing content the government deems unacceptable and punishing violations with criminal penalties.

The law demands the elimination of online comments considered to be misinformation or disinformation, that might cause "hate" or disrupt stability, and any comment that might violate any existing law.

Its provisions call for a sentence of up to three years and/or a fine for any person convicted of creating "misinformation" and "disinformation" with the intent of causing public panic, loss of trust or social division in cyberspace.

The law also would require internet service providers to keep usernames, IP addresses and other personal data for up to three years. The data has to be kept in a place designated by the government. □

## U.N.: Over 2 million Yemeni children may starve in 2021



In this June 27, 2020 file photo, a medic checks a malnourished newborn baby inside an incubator at Al-Sabeen hospital in Sanaa, Yemen.

Associated Press

By NOHA ELHENNAWY  
Associated Press

**CAIRO (AP)** — More than 2 million Yemeni children un-

der the age of 5 are expected to endure acute malnutrition in 2021, four United Nations agencies said Friday, urging stakeholders to end the yearslong conflict that has brought the Arab world's poorest country to the brink of famine.

The U.N. report warned that nearly one in six of those kids — 400,000 of the 2.3 million — are at risk of death due to severe acute malnutrition this year, a significant increase from last year's estimates.

The report also said a lack of funds was hampering humanitarian programs in

Yemen, as donor nations have failed to make good on their commitments.

Compounding the crisis, around 1.2 million pregnant or breastfeeding women in Yemen are also projected to be acutely malnourished this year.

"These numbers are yet another cry for help from Yemen, where each malnourished child also means a family struggling to survive," said David Beasley, executive director of the World Food Program, which jointly issued the report with the Food and Agriculture Organization,

UNICEF and the World Health Organization.

"The crisis in Yemen is a toxic mix of conflict, economic collapse and a severe shortage of funding," Beasley explained. In 2020, humanitarian programs in Yemen received only \$1.9 billion of the required \$3.4 billion, the report said.

UNICEF estimates that virtually all of Yemen's 12 million children require some sort of assistance.

This can include food aid, health services, clean water, schooling and cash grants to help the poorest families scrape by. □

# Int'l Criminal Court member states to elect new prosecutor

By MIKE CORDER

Associated Press

**THE HAGUE, Netherlands**

(AP) — Member states of the International Criminal Court were electing a new prosecutor Friday, ending a drawn-out and divisive process for appointing the person who will replace incumbent Fatou Bensouda when her nine-year term expires later this year.

The prosecutor holds a position that is one of the toughest in international law due to the nature of the court's cases. The Trump administration slapped sanctions on Bensouda and one of her top aides last year for continuing to investigate war crimes allegations against Americans, although the court was often criticized in the past for its focus on African crimes. Last week, ICC judges angered Jerusalem by saying the court's jurisdiction extends to territories occupied by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war, potentially clearing the way for the prosecutor to open an investigation into Israeli military actions and the country's construction of settlements in the occupied West Bank and annexed east Jerusalem.

Attempts to appoint the global court's third prosecutor by consensus among the 123 member states failed, forcing the process into secret balloting. Friday's vote involves four candidates: Spain's Carlos Castresana Fernandez, Fer-gal Gaynor of Ireland, British barrister Karim Khan and Francesco Lo Voi of Italy. After a first round of voting, no candidate gained the necessary absolute majority. Khan led with 59 votes, followed by Gaynor with 47. Fernandez got 12 votes and Lo Voi five. A second ballot was scheduled for later Friday.

The selection process and the alleged failure by the ICC's Assembly of States Parties to conduct stringent background checks on the candidates has drawn criticism from civil society groups that work with the court. "Although ICC member countries took a



In this Thursday, Feb. 6, 2020, file photo the sun bounces off the International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands.

number of innovative steps to guide this election process, they did not put in place steps to professionally vet candidates as part of an assessment of 'high moral character,' a key requirement under the ICC treaty for the prosecutor," Liz Evenson, associate international justice director at Human Rights Watch, said. A diplomat who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss details of closed meetings said the fact that many of the meetings to discuss possible successors to Bensouda took place virtually made it difficult for member nations to discuss concerns during informal "corridor" meetings.

Khan, an assistant secretary-general of the United Nations, was widely seen as the favorite to get the job, but neither he nor any of the other candidates garnered enough support to be appointed by consensus, prompting Friday's election in New York.

At the U.N., Khan leads an investigative team set up to investigate allegations of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes committed by the Islamic State group in Iraq. He is no stranger to the ICC, having acted as a defense lawyer for Kenyan Deputy President William Ruto and persuading judges to throw out prosecution charges

against his client. Gaynor, one of his rivals for the prosecutor's job, acted as a legal representative for victims in the Ruto case, which focused on post-election violence. Judges said the case was marked by politician meddling and interference with prosecution witnesses, and

tossed the charges for lack of evidence. Fernandez's background includes filing cases against former dictators Gen. Jorge Rafael Videla of Argentina and Gen. Augusto Pinochet of Chile. He also helped win indictments in war crimes and organized crime cases in Guatemala, including

Associated Press

one against ex-President Alfonso Portillo.

Gaynor is currently a judge at a Kosovo war crimes court and a prosecutor at a Cambodia war crimes tribunal as well as having represented victims at the ICC and been a prosecution lawyer at U.N. war crimes tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. He has also acted as a legal representative for Palestinian victims in the ICC probe of alleged crimes in Palestinian territories and for victims in the court's Afghanistan investigation.

Lo Voi, a late addition to the ballot, is a Palermo prosecutor with a history of tackling mafia crime in Italy. Human Rights Watch's Evenson urged the court's member states to pick the best candidate.

"As ICC member countries cast their ballots for the next ICC prosecutor, they should do so solely with the merit of the candidates in mind. The ICC prosecutor drives the work of the court, in deciding which cases to pursue and how," she said. □

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## Valentine Vibes

ORANJESTAD — Aruba Today invited their readers to surprise their loved one by sending us a picture of her/him together with a personal message to publish in our newspaper. We are thankful for the wonderful and lovely messages and pictures we received and are happy to share them with you. Enjoy this festive day where you can emphasize the importance of this special person in your life. Celebrate love! □

**Happy Valentine's Day to the women in my life! Love ya!!!**

Drew

**Looking forward to many more days in our second home of Aruba. I Love You Very Much. Happy Valentine's Day.**

Your Lunny, David

**Dear Ana,**  
**Feliz Dia de San Valentin.**  
I'm so happy to celebrate with you this year in Aruba.  
Cheers to many more!

Neel

**My JoAnn,**  
For 42 years you have been my one true companion, my safe place to fall, my truest friend. Thank you for loving me through each bend in the road and every season of life.

Forever yours alone, Glenn

**Happy Valentine's Day Jimmy! I am so lucky to have you in my life. I love you!!**

Xoxo Mack

**My love and I on Aruba, our 38th straight year, it was really touch and go to get here. But love conquered all, bringing us to our happy place. Our love is enhanced on beautiful Aruba. I love you Mike!**

Pat Scimeca

## MONDAY MADNESS AND BINGO ARE TEMPORARILY SUSPENDED

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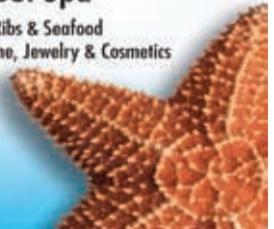
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## Aruba Tourism Authority (A.T.A.) launches new concept: Promotions for 'workations Aruba' receives great



**ORANJESTAD** — The latest developments of the Covid-19 pandemic shows that more and more persons are working from home. The Aruba Tourism Authority (A.T.A.) took this fact as an opportunity to present Aruba as an alternative destination for the persons that want to visit the island and stay longer while at the same time be able to work. This in return will create an income for our local businesses and our economy.

The project is being led by the Aruba Conven-



tion Bureau (A.C.B) and A.T.A. through their 'business-to-business' (B2B) database and all other marketing channels in order to reach all interested in this 'workation' in Aruba. 'Workation' is currently being promoted in the US and visitors will be able to stay in Aruba for 90 days. In the future Aruba hopes to be able to extend this in order to offer longer periods.

Attractive and valuable packages are being offered at three types of accommodations:



- Hotel
- Hotels with kitchens such as timeshares
- Condominiums and vacation rentals

The outcome of this promotion has been very positive in the US market. Many families see this as an opportunity to leave their country to stay at our island for an extended period as a great opportunity to work and at the same time vacation. US citizens do have to go through different protocols before being able to visit the island but from reactions received at the A.T.A. office it is worth it. They know that despite the challenges caused by the pandemic they still feel safe in Aruba. □



**Alberto Perret-Gentil, Vice-president of operations**

**EAGLE BEACH — Azure Beach Residences speaks for itself the moment you set foot on the place. The luxurious real estate has all ingredients to offer you a 5-star-de-luxe plate. Located right on the beach, offering a blend between your own condominium with advantages and experience of a hotel and all amenities that belong to a spot in heaven.**

## Amazing Azure



Aruba Today was delighted to talk to a wonderful couple from New York, Esteban Marquez and his wife who are proud owner of one of the condos. "We love the condo we have purchased at Azure. We are planning on retirement five years from now, we are from New York. This is excellent, we are very happy with our choice and we love the island." Happy owners on a happy island, it sounds like music to his ears says Alberto Perret-Gentil, Executive Vice-president of Operations at Azure Beach Residences. "In August 2020 we had the grand opening of Tower II of Azure Beach Residences. We see that there is a new trend of people wanting to work from their second home, their vacation condo. Our island is blessed with the perfect beaches and climate, it is very safe and -many do not know this- it has the best internet in the Caribbean." During the COVID-19 crisis Pering Group, also the developer of Harbour House Aruba, stays connected to their

market and is able to capture all those people staying home at this time. "We continuously show our new projects and new financial ideas. We are very optimistic. This is going to be the best time in sales in our 20 years on Aruba," Perret-Gentil states.

Tower 1 of Azure Beach Residences has 45 units on the northern and southern corner and is practically sold out. The residence offers two units at the upper level of the Clubhouse which has on the ground level the restaurant and the lobby and on the upper level the gym, area for grill and a pool table. Tower 2 offers 60 units with studios, 1-bedroom, 2-bedroom, 3-bedroom units and 3-bedroom penthouses at the 8th floor. For more information you can visit the website [www.azure-aruba.com](http://www.azure-aruba.com). Harbour House Aruba is another project of this group offering 94 condominiums in Oranjestad, just in front of the Renaissance Mall. More information can be found at: [www.harbourhousearuba.com](http://www.harbourhousearuba.com). □



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# Sign of inequality: U.S. salaries recover even as jobs haven't

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER

AP Economics Writer

**WASHINGTON (AP)** — In a stark sign of the economic inequality that has marked the pandemic recession and recovery, Americans as a whole are now earning the same amount in wages and salaries that they did before the virus struck — even with nearly 9 million fewer people working.

The turnaround in total wages underscores how disproportionately America's job losses have afflicted workers in lower-income occupations rather than in higher-paying industries, where employees have actually gained jobs as well as income since early last year.

In February 2020, Americans earned \$9.66 trillion in wages and salaries, at a seasonally adjusted annual rate, according to the Commerce Department data. By April, after the virus had flattened the U.S. economy, that figure had shrunk by 10%. It then gradually recovered before reaching \$9.67 trillion in December, the latest period for which data is available. Those dollar figures include only wages and salaries that people earned from jobs.

They don't include money that tens of millions of Americans have received from unemployment benefits or the Social Security and other aid that goes to many other households. The figures also don't include investment income. A separate measure tracked by the Labor Department shows the same result: Total labor income, excluding government workers, was 0.6% higher in January than it was a year earlier.

That is "pretty remarkable," given the sharp drop in employment, said Michael Feroli, an economist at JPMorgan Chase.

The figures document that the vanished earnings from 8.9 million Americans who have lost jobs to the pandemic remain less than the combined salaries of new hires and the pay raises that the 150 million Ameri-



In this Feb. 6, 2021 file photo, a woman walks past a "Now Hiring" sign displayed at a CD One Price Cleaners in Schaumburg, Ill.

Associated Press

cans who have kept their jobs have received.

The job cuts resulting from the pandemic recession have fallen heavily on lower-income workers across the service sector — from restaurants and hotels to retail stores and entertainment venues.

By contrast, tens of millions of higher-income Americans, especially those able to work from home, have managed to keep or acquire jobs and continue to receive pay increases.

"We've never seen anything like that before," said Richard Deitz, a senior economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, referring to the concentration of job losses. "It's a totally different kind of downturn than we've experienced in modern times."

"Of the nearly 10 million jobs that have been eliminated by the pandemic, 40% have been in restaurants, bars, hotels, arts, and entertainment. Retailers have lost nearly 400,000 jobs and many low-paying health care workers, such as nursing home attendants and home health care aides, have also been laid off.

On average, restaurant workers make just below \$13 an hour, according to Labor Department data. Retail cashier pay is about the same. That's less than

half the economy-wide average of nearly \$30 an hour.

"It tells the story of an economy that has really tanked for the most vulnerable," said Elise Gould, an economist at the liberal Economic Policy Institute. "It's shocking how small a dent that has made in the aggregate."

The figures also underscore the unusually accelerated nature of this recession.

As a whole, both the job losses that struck early last spring and the initial rebound in hiring that followed have happened much faster than they did in previous recessions and recoveries. After the Great Recession, for example, it took nearly 2 1/2 years for wages and salaries to regain their pre-recession levels.

"This is one of the worst recessions we've ever had — compressed into one-tenth of the time that a normal recession would take," said Ernie Tedeschi, policy economist at the investment bank Evercore ISI. "Hopefully, the recovery will continue to be compressed as well. That's where the fears are and where the debate is."

One reason why the job losses have had relatively little impact on the nation's total pay is that so many of the affected employees

For people making less than \$30,000 a year, employment has fallen 14% as of December. For those earning more than \$85,000, it has actually risen slightly. For those in-between, employment has fallen 4%.

By contrast, job losses were much more widespread in the Great Recession of 2008-2009.

Relatively higher-paying blue collar jobs in manufacturing and construction were hit worst: Construction lost 20% of its jobs, manufacturing 15%. Even a decade later, neither sector had fully recovered those jobs by the time the pandemic hit. Financial services lost 6% of its jobs in the previous recession, compared with 1% this time.

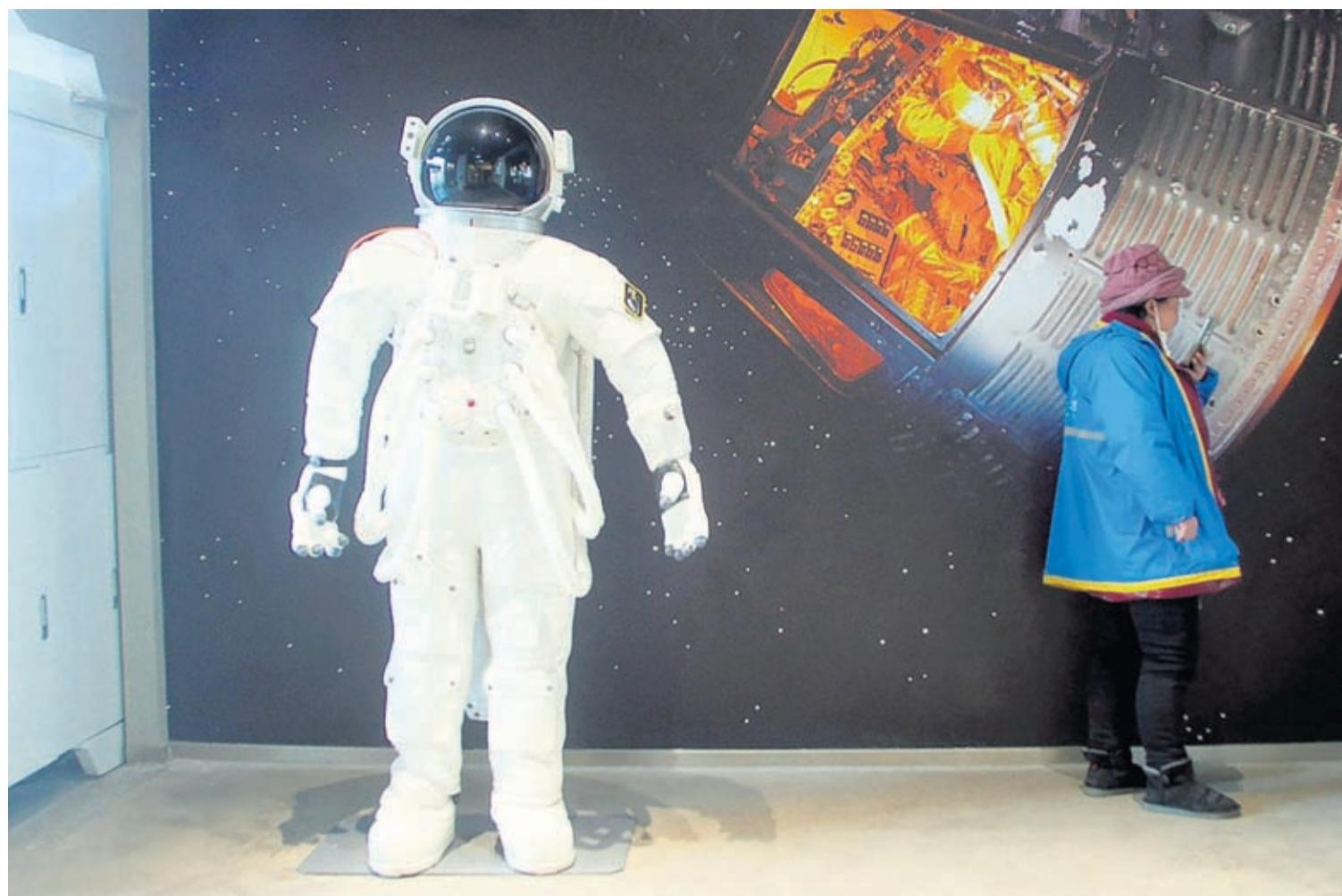
Some companies have cut wages in this recession, but on the whole the many millions of Americans fortunate enough to keep their jobs have generally received pay raises at largely pre-recession rates. Some of those income gains likely reflect cost-of-living raises; the Commerce Department's wage and salary data isn't adjusted for inflation.

Tedeschi calculates that the typical — or median — hourly pay for employed workers has risen about 3.5% in the past year, roughly the same pace as before the pandemic. That's a sign of what some economists refer to as the "sticky wages" concept: Some employers prefer to lay off workers while leaving pay largely unchanged for their remaining employees.

Truman Bewley, a retired Yale University economist who wrote a book about the concept of sticky wages, said that most companies have a key core of workers they rely on through hard times and are reluctant to cut pay for them.

And there's another reason, Bewley said, why many companies cut jobs instead of pay. While researching his book, he said a factory manager told him why his company did so: "It gets the misery out the door." □

# Mars mission inspires growing fan base back in China



A delivery driver waits for an order at a space-themed cafe in Beijing, Wednesday, Feb. 10, 2021.

By SAM McNEIL  
Associated Press

**BEIJING (AP)** — Cui Tingting dyed her hair Mars red for the arrival of China's spacecraft at the planet known in Chinese as the Fire Star.

"This is a greater era for space, and the future of mankind lies in the exploration of outer space," said Cui, director of the China Mars Society, the local chapter of a global advocacy network. She hosted an online party Wednesday night to wait for the announcement that the Tianwen-1 spacecraft, launched last July, had reached Mars orbit.

Video from participants across China showed a replica of Tianwen-1's robot rover in the home of one society member. One wore a homemade space suit; another controlled his robot dog.

"Earth is our mother planet ... but for me, Mars is the same," Cui said.

China is falling in love with space, inspired by the ruling Communist Party's increasingly ambitious plans over the past two decades to launch humans into orbit and explore the moon and

Mars.

Tourists flock to tropical Hainan island to watch rockets blast off. Others visit mock Mars colonies in desert sites with white domes, airlocks and spacesuits. The number of space-themed TV shows, books and fan clubs is growing.

The most popular space-themed account on the Twitter-like Sina Weibo microblog service, "Our Space," has 1.25 million followers.

The expanding space program coincides with President Xi Jinping's campaign to promote an image of China returning to its former glory as a world leader.

"It's a symbol of power for China," said Chen Qiufan, a science fiction author in Guangdong whose books include "Waste Tide."

Xi's government is trying to nurture public enthusiasm with a five-year Scientific Literacy Action Plan. It includes a promise of support for developing Chinese science fiction.

In November, the city government of Beijing announced plans to build a science fiction industry cluster area to attract tal-

ent and create "influential original science fiction works."

"You have to leverage the power of films, movies and science fiction to broadcast propaganda and this idea: we need to go there," said Chen, comparing it to the Renaissance.

That love affair also is catching on in Japan, India and other countries that are sending probes across the solar system, joining a club of explorers long dominated by Washington and Moscow.

The race to explore Mars is so crowded that Tianwen-1 isn't even the only spacecraft to arrive at the planet this week.

On Tuesday, Amal, a spacecraft launched by the United Arab Emirates, swung into orbit.

In the Emirates' biggest city, Dubai, the government projected images of Mars' two moons into the sky. Dubai's Burj Khalifa skyscraper glowed red at night. Billboards depicting Amal, Arabic for hope, tower over Dubai's highways.

In India, one of the country's biggest film stars, Ak-

shay Kumar, led a 2019 blockbuster, "Mission Mangal," inspired by the country's first mission to Mars.

A new collection of short stories written in a half dozen languages called "The Best of World SF" captures this global wonder, said the book's editor, Lavie Tidhar. In American and British sci-fi, Mars often plays the pristine utopia to Earth's decrepit dystopia, but not so elsewhere, said Tidhar, who was raised on a kibbutz, a collectivist commune in Israel. In his novels "Martian Sands" and "Central Station," a reborn Soviet Union, China, and Israel flourish on the bleak landscape of Mars.

"It's boring, it's hot, it's cramped. A bit like growing up in a kibbutz — except you can never leave," he said.

China's first science fiction book, "City of Cats" in 1933, was set on Mars.

The genre died out during the ultra-radical 1966-76 Cultural Revolution, when the U.S.-Soviet space race inspired film studios to release "2001: A Space Odyssey" and "Solaris."

China re-embraced imagi-

nary other worlds with the explosive success of "The Three-Body Problem" by Liu Cixin, first published as a magazine serial from 2006 to 2010. In 2015, Liu became the first Chinese author to receive the Hugo Award, science fiction's highest honor.

A Hollywood-style blockbuster, "The Wandering Earth," based on a novella by Liu, grossed more than \$700 million worldwide in 2019.

China became the third nation to launch an astronaut into orbit on its own in 2003, four decades after the former Soviet Union and the United States.

Its first temporary orbiting laboratory was launched in 2011 and a second in 2016. Plans call for a permanent space station after 2022.

Space officials had expressed hope for a crewed lunar mission as early as this year but said that depended on budget and technology.

They have pushed back that target to at least 2024.

Science fiction writers already are imaging Chinese colonies on Mars.

Hao Jingfang's novel "Vagabonds," published last year, is set between a poverty-free but austere Martian society and a poor, crowded, polluted Earth. Hao became the first female Chinese author to receive the Hugo Award in 2016.

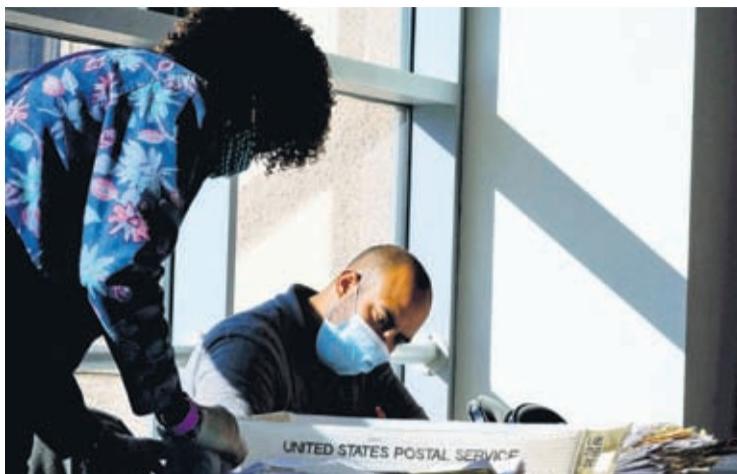
Luo Lingzuo's 2019 "Land Without Borders" imagines Chinese scientists genetically altering potatoes to grow in amber Martian soil. Physicist Liu Yang's "Orphans of the Red Planet," about high school students on Mars battling hostile aliens, is being turned into a TV series.

"We need to go to space," said Chen, the science fiction author in Guangdong. "Then we have the power equivalent to what the United States has, and then we can become the giant."

Cui, of the Mars Society, already is planning another party in May when Tianwen-1's robot lander is due to touch down. □

Associated Press

## Report highlights cyber risks to U.S. election systems



Election workers handle ballots as vote counting in the general election continues at State Farm Arena on Thursday, Nov. 5, 2020, in Atlanta.

Associated Press

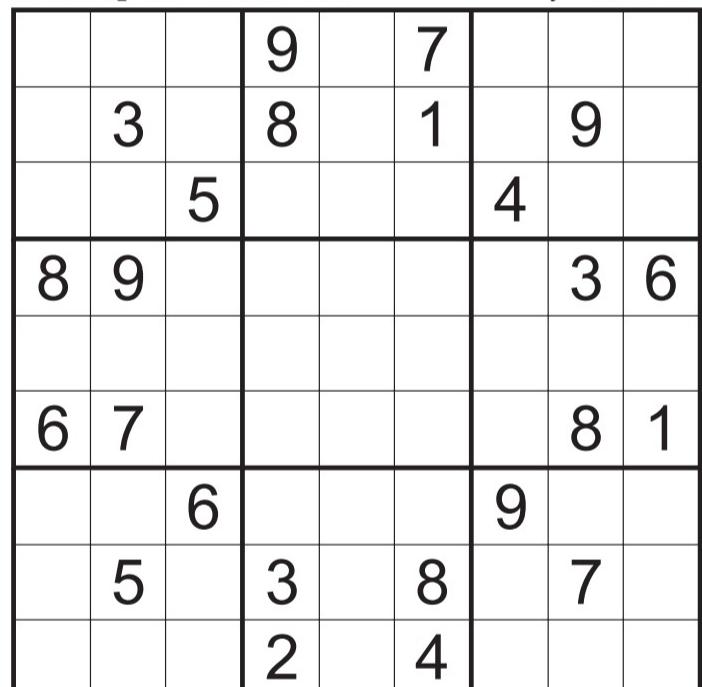
By CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY

ATLANTA (AP) — Election systems in the U.S. are vulnerable to cyber intrusions similar to the one that hit federal agencies and nu-

merous businesses last year and remain a potential target for foreign hacking, according to a report released Wednesday. The report by the Center

### Conceptis Sudoku

By Dave Green



Difficulty Level ★★★★

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2/13

**TODAY** **BONDIA**

## How to reach us!

Downtown

for Internet Security, a non-profit that partners with the federal government on election security initiatives, focuses on how hardware and software components can provide potential entryways for hackers.

"We have to continue to get better," said Aaron Wilson, a co-author of the report. "We have to improve our defenses, as those that are on the other side are likely honing their attack strategy, as well."

The 2020 election was deemed the "most secure" in history by a coalition of

government cybersecurity experts and state and local election officials. □

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Week 2/1113 (16k);  
Week 5/1315 (18k);  
Week 5&6/1521 (20k/Wk.);  
Week 7&8/1408 (18k/Wk.);  
Week 8/1113; 8/1409 (17kWk.);  
Week 9/1218 (15k);  
Week 10/1207 (15k);  
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#### GOLD Season

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GV \$5k OV \$7k  
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Police Tipline	11141
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## Dwayne Johnson has 'surreal' look back in TV's "Young Rock"

By LYNN ELBER  
AP Television Writer

**LOS ANGELES (AP)** — When Dwayne Johnson sold the idea for a TV comedy about his colorful early years to NBC in early 2020, he was delighted to tell his parents that a version of their family life was bound for the small screen.

Just days later, his father was felled by a blood clot-caused heart attack at age 75. His loss inevitably altered "Young Rock," said Johnson, who plays himself in the series debuting 8 p.m. EST Tuesday. A trio of actors portray Johnson's younger iterations.

"I get emotional when I talk about this, when I talk about my dad and think about it," Johnson said, pausing to compose himself. "I had a complex relationship with my dad and he was a complex man."

The series intended to include the elder Johnson's highs and lows, but after his death his son decided to lean more fully into his "really uncanny ability to make anyone feel good." With a smile, he recited dad Rocky Johnson's buoyant greetings, including a favorite: "'Have you been working out?'"

Dwayne Johnson, billed in his dazzling wrestling days as The Rock, likely got a



This image released by NBC shows Joseph Lee Anderson as Rocky Johnson, from left, Adrian Groulx as Dwayne and Stacey Leilua as Ata Johnson in a scene from "Young Rock," debuting on Feb. 16.

Associated Press

share of his skill and ambition from his Nova Scotia-born father, who held National Wrestling Alliance titles and was among the first Black champions in World Wrestling Entertainment history.

But he may also owe his dad for the charm and unforced warmth that make Dwayne Johnson instantly endearing, despite his imposing build and status as a box-office star with credits in the "Fast and Furious" and "Jumanji" franchises. The sports comedy "Ballers" is part of his TV resume. He's the real deal, "generous and lovely," said Nahnatchka Khan, an executive producer for "Young Rock" along with Johnson. "He's

collaborative, funny and willing to take chances. So much of comedy is trust.... and I trust him completely." Bradley Constant, who plays the teenage Johnson yearning for girls, cool threads and a car, took on his first major role with guidance from him.

"He reassured me just to be myself. He's a very genuine, normal guy who's lived an incredible life, of course," said Constant, who saw the family's financial difficulties as a way to help ground him in the role.

"Young Rock" is structured around Johnson's depiction as a 2032 presidential candidate — a less time-certain move the political independent has consid-

ered. Is he preparing America for his next chapter?

"I think the people will prepare me. I can say that," he replied with a laugh. In the debut episode, he's interviewed by Randall Park, also playing himself but as an actor-turned-TV journalist. Park starred in "Fresh Off the Boat," which Khan created and produced.

As Johnson recalls the past, there are flashbacks to scenes of him as a child, played by Adrian Groulx; a high schooler (Constant); and young adult, played by Australian actor Uli Latukefu. Joseph Lee Anderson and Stacey Leilua co-star as parents Rocky and Ata Johnson.

Matthew Willig stands tall as the late Andre the Giant, one of the wrestling world figures shown as a commonplace part of Johnson's uncommon childhood and youth marred by setbacks he fought to overcome. "He really wanted to go there and show the struggle, that it hasn't been a straight line to the top for him," said Khan. "He's been knocked down a lot and he's had to pivot off what he thought was his dream and find a new dream, a new path. Being able to explore those kinds of moments in a comedy

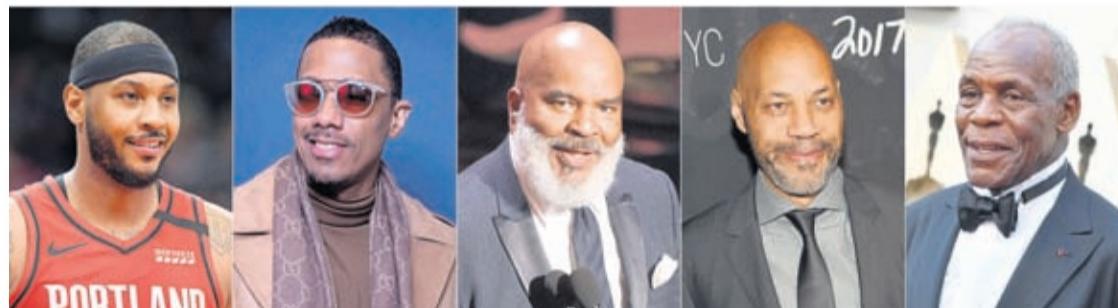
are really important." Johnson proved "down for it all. It was just about him wanting to portray the people who affected his life in a real way," she said, adding that what's depicted in the series happened or was inspired by events.

In reflecting on the past, Dwayne Johnson said, he's come to realize the challenges proved the impetus for real growth.

"It became an anchoring factor in my struggle and my determination to, quite frankly, not be a victim when, again, we were evicted (from housing) when I was 13 or 14," he said. As he worked with Khan to find the right approach to the show, "I did know in my heart the most important thing was to be authentic and to be OK with ripping some stories open and ripping some past open."

That includes his own missteps, which Johnson has said included arrests for fighting and theft before he was 17. Even when things were tough, Johnson said, he was bolstered by family and "had this opportunity to go and witness these real-life heroes in front of me, like my dad and these wrestlers who were adored and loved and so strong and powerful." □

## ABC News to air newsmagazine on the Black experience



This combination photo shows, from left, Carmelo Anthony, Nick Cannon, David Alan Grier, John Ridley and Danny Glover who will be featured on "Soul of a Nation," an ABC newsmagazine focused on Black life in America.

Associated Press

Glover, David Alan Grier, John Ridley, Saweetie and Janaya Future Khan.

The network saw Black viewership soar last year during programming that explored the aftermath of Floyd's death and a two-hour "20/20" special on Breonna Taylor, said Marie Nelson, series creator and ABC News' senior vice president of integrated content strategy. ABC also did specials on Juneteenth and disparities involving race and class during the pandemic.

Still, at least half of the audience for several of these programs was white, she said. It illustrates the opportunity to both speak to a Black audience and edu-

cate others about what is going on in the community.

Each "Soul of a Nation" episode will feature an "in the kitchen" segment with familiar faces discussing current events and end with a musical or spoken word performance.

"We refer to the show oftentimes as a news-variety show," Nelson said. □

By DAVID BAUDER  
AP Media Writer

**NEW YORK (AP)** — ABC News says that next month it will begin airing "Soul of a Nation," which the network believes is the first prime-time broadcast newsmagazine focused on Black life in America.

The network has committed to six episodes that will air on consecutive Tuesday nights. No premiere date or time slot has been announced. Each episode will be centered on a theme, such as spirituality, activism in sports and the racial reck-

oning triggered by George Floyd's death. Journalist Jemele Hill and actor Marsai Martin of "Black-ish" are among the guest hosts.

Besides stories by ABC News journalists, episodes will present a variety of voices including Carmelo Anthony, Nick Cannon, Danny

1	6	2	9	4	7	8	5	3
4	3	7	8	5	1	6	9	2
9	8	5	6	2	3	4	1	7
8	9	1	4	7	2	5	3	6
5	2	3	1	8	6	7	4	9
6	7	4	5	3	9	2	8	1
3	4	6	7	1	5	9	2	8
2	5	9	3	6	8	1	7	4
7	1	8	2	9	4	3	6	5

Difficulty Level ★★★★

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# Watt, Texans 'mutually' agree to split in more team upheaval

By KRISTIE RIEKEN

AP Sports Writer

**HOUSTON (AP)** — J.J. Watt didn't just play for the Houston Texans, he was the Houston Texans.

The physical embodiment of a young franchise lacking much of an identity before the burly Wisconsin kid donned that No. 99 jersey, Watt wowed the football world with his defensive prowess.

Now he's gone, and a team already in the midst of unprecedented upheaval faces a future suddenly even more bleak.

"I have sat down with the McNair family and I have asked them for my release and we have mutually agreed to part ways at this time," Watt said Friday in a video on social media.

The three-time Defensive Player of the Year and 2017 Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year has spent his entire career with the Texans after being drafted 11th overall in 2011. The star defensive end had one year remaining on a six-year, \$100 million contract.

"The connection I have with the people of Houston is special, and I will never take that for granted because I know how rare it is," Watt said in the video. "I just want you to know that I love you and I appreciate you. I want to thank the McNair family for drafting me and giving me my first opportunity in the NFL. Thank you, Houston."

Houston's franchise had been around for nine seasons before Watt's arrival, but had little success with one winning record and never reaching the post-season. Watt's presence helped change things immediately: Houston went 10-6 to win the AFC South in his rookie year. He led the Texans to their first playoff win that season when his interception for a touchdown put them on top for good in a 31-10 victory over the Bengals.

The Texans finished a franchise-best 12-4 the following year behind Watt's stellar season, reaching the playoffs again. They won the division six times in his



In this Dec. 6, 2020, file photo, Houston Texans defensive end J.J. Watt (99) rushes in during the second half of an NFL football game against the Indianapolis Colts in Houston.

Associated Press

Houston years, and as his resume grew, so did the image of the Texans.

"He's just everything that we really want to do here... epitomized," team owner Cal McNair said.

"He was a great role model for the fans and teammates and to show people how to do things and do things the right way. So he was wonderful that way."

Along with his contributions on the field, Watt was lauded for his humanitarian efforts after raising more than \$40 million for Hurricane Harvey relief in 2017.

"Simply put, there has been no person in the past decade who has made a greater impact on the Texans organization than J.J. Watt," team co-founder and senior chair Janice McNair said.

Watt's departure comes in an offseason in which the Texans have hired coach David Culley and general manager Nick Caserio to replace Bill O'Brien, who held both jobs and was fired after an 0-4 start in 2020. They're also facing uncertainty at quarterback because standout De-

shaun Watson requested a trade.

"Change is never easy, especially when it involves the ones you love," Cal McNair said. "J.J.'s impact on not only our organization, but the entire Houston community, is unlike any player in our franchise's history. I told J.J. earlier this week that we will forever consider him a Texan. We take solace in knowing that this is not a goodbye but a 'see you soon.'"

McNair was asked why he chose to release Watt instead of attempting to trade him and get something in return.

"We felt this did right by J.J.," Cal McNair said.

"Not every decision is easy or easy to understand. We want to do what's right for our players. We want to focus on bringing championships to Houston."

Watt was booed by Texans fans on draft night. It didn't take him long to win over the fan base and become the most beloved Texan. The fearsome pass rusher was the Defensive Player of the Year in 2012, 2014 and 2015. He led the NFL in

sacks and tackles for losses in 2012 (20½ and 39) and 2015 (17½ and 29).

Since his NFL debut in 2011, he leads the league in tackles for losses (172), quarterback hits (281), multi-sack games (26) and sack yards (713 1-2) and ranks second with a franchise-record 101 sacks. He also developed such a knack for using his huge hands to swat down passes at the line that he earned the nickname "J.J. Swatt."

He is the only player in NFL history with 20 or more sacks and 10 or more passes defensed in a single season, doing it in both 2012 and 2014. He's tied for fifth among defensive linemen in league history with six touchdowns in the regular season, including three TD catches.

The four-time Pro Bowler never missed a game until 2016, when a back injury ended his season. He broke his leg in the fifth game of 2017 and some wondered if he'd be able to return to form after two serious injuries in two years.

Watt answered by finishing with 16 sacks in 2018 and

earned All-Pro honors for the fifth time.

Watt, who turns 32 next month, played just eight regular-season games in 2019 after tearing a pectoral muscle, but returned to help the Texans in the playoffs. He played every game in 2020 and had five sacks, 52 tackles and returned an interception for a touchdown.

But he struggled dealing with the losses and said the season was the most difficult of his career as the Texans sank to 4-12 after winning the division the previous two years.

Now Watt's a free agent, and speculation is he'll end up in Pittsburgh where his brothers T.J. and Derek Watt play.

An offshore betting platform released odds for his next team with the Steelers as favorites.

Cal McNair has already thought about what it will be like seeing his team's most recognizable player in another uniform.

"It'll be hard," he said, "but we're always proud of J.J. and he'll always be a Texan." □

## Australian Open: No-look shot in Serena's win; COVID fan ban

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP)

— If Serena Williams somehow manages to conjure up another on-the-run, back-to-the-net, no-look, over-the-shoulder shot in her next Australian Open match, a local coronavirus flareup means there won't be any spectators to react with the appreciative applause and yells that greeted this one.

That's because while Williams was using that bit of magic Friday to help pull off a comeback victory over an opponent who is 20 years younger, the head of the Victoria state government was announcing a five-day lockdown in response to a COVID-19 outbreak at a quarantine hotel.

Competition at the year's first Grand Slam tournament will be allowed to continue, but no fans can attend as of Saturday.

After the pandemic led to the cancellation of Wimbledon, zero fans at the U.S. Open and only 1,000 a day at the French Open in 2020, the government let Tennis Australia admit up to 30,000 daily, 50% of normal capacity.

But not anymore.

"It's going to be a rough few days for, I think, everyone. But we'll hopefully get through it," Williams said after beating 19-year-old Anastasia Potapova 7-6 (5), 6-2 despite 25 unforced



United States' Serena Williams makes a forehand return to Russia's Anastasia Potapova during their third round match at the Australian Open tennis championship in Melbourne, Australia, Friday, Feb. 12, 2021.

Associated Press

errors in the first set alone. "It's been really fun to have the crowd back, especially here. It's been really cool. But you know what? At the end of the day, we have to do what's best. Hopefully it will be all right."

A year ago, Williams dropped just three games against Potapova in the first round. But then the American was surprised in the third round, her earliest exit in Australia in 14 years. This time at that stage, Williams—who has won seven of her 23 Grand Slam sin-

gles titles in Australia — fell behind in the opening set, which Potapova served for at 5-3.

But the 2016 Wimbledon junior champion double-faulted five times in that game, including twice on set point.

Williams then trailed 5-3 in the tiebreaker. But she took the next four points, the last on a 21-stroke exchange that ended with Potapova putting a forehand into the net.

"I don't have much experience on those stages. For

me, it was an absolutely mental thing. I was over-thinking. I was over-playing. Over-hitting," said Potapova, who was visited by a trainer in the second set for what she described as pain between her ribs that made it hard to breathe.

"Respect to Serena. She came back. She just didn't let it go," the 101st-ranked Potapova said. "She kept fighting for each point, for each ball."

Never more so than shortly after Potapova edged ahead again by breaking

to begin the second set. Williams broke right back with the help of a remarkable get on a lob. After somehow putting her racket on the ball and sending it in the right direction, the 39-year-old paused and smiled, assuming the point was over — and then laughed upon realizing she won the point, because Potapova responded by putting an overhead into the net.

"I mean, that was a great point. Very beautiful," Potapova said with a smile in a video interview with The Associated Press. "That's what she does. That's what makes her be great."

Williams now plays seventh-seeded Aryna Sabalenka, who matched her best Grand Slam showing by reaching the fourth round with a 6-3, 6-1 win over Ann Li.

"It's always, I think, a big challenge to play against these kind of players. But I'm going to do everything I can to get this win," Sabalenka said. "We're all here for the wins."

She's been accumulating them at quite a pace going back to the end of last season: Sabalenka has won 18 of her past 19 matches. "She hits very hard. She has a big, big power game," Williams said about the 22-year-old from Belarus. "She's a big girl — strong like myself." □

## MLB cuts spring training travel, drops college opponents



In this Feb. 18, 2014, file photo, Atlanta Braves batting helmets sit on the field under a shining sun during a spring training baseball workout in Kissimmee, Fla.

Associated Press

By RONALD BLUM  
AP Baseball Writer  
NEW YORK (AP) — Ma-

jer League Baseball revamped its spring training exhibition schedule be-

cause of the pandemic, cutting travel for Florida-based teams in an effort to minimize coronavirus risks. College baseball teams, which often play big league clubs but are not subject to major league testing protocols, were dropped from the revised schedules announced Friday.

Split-squad games, traditionally used in the first half of the exhibition season to allow evaluation of more players, also were eliminated. Florida-based teams may decide to dress at their own ballparks and travel in uniform for road exhibi-

tions to increase distancing while putting on uniforms. Arizona-based teams traditionally dress at home and take batting practice at home, then travel for road exhibitions. Pitchers and catchers open spring training workouts Wednesday, and the exhibition season starts Feb. 28, two days later than initially announced on Sept. 16.

The regular season remains on track to start April 1 after the Major League Baseball Players Association rejected the clubs' proposal to delay opening day until April 22 and cut each

team's schedule from 162 games to 154. The rejected plan would have pushed back the start of spring training until March 22.

Teams were divided into three groups for the Grapefruit League season to eliminate longer bus rides:

— Florida East Coast: Houston, Miami, New York Mets, St. Louis, Washington

— Florida West Coast: Baltimore, Detroit, New York Yankees, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Toronto

— Southwest Florida: Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Minnesota, Pittsburgh, Tampa Bay. □